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SHORT STORIES

EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON (OF PEARSON'S WEEKLY)

No. 315.] FOR WEEK ENDING JANUARY 12, 1895. [PRICE ONE PENNY.

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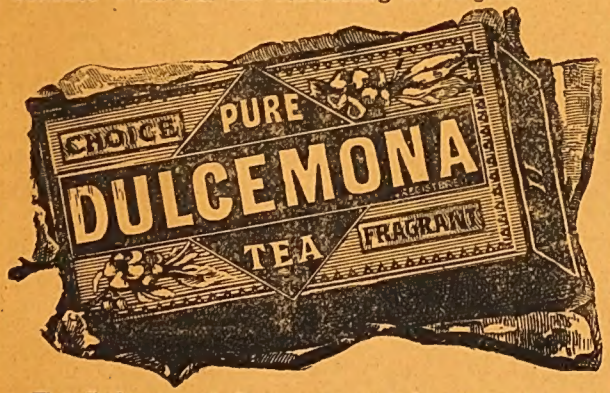

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SHORT STORIES.

EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON.

No. 315.] FOR THE WEEK ENDING JANUARY 12, 1895. [PRICE ONE PENNY.

OKADA,

the fickle one.

A story of the Chino-Japanese War.

IN the evening, when the bright sunlight had faded into gloaming, I, Okada Shikoku, went abroad out of my father's dwelling place under the shade of the blossoming cherry trees on the Ten San road, which leads from Fukuokal to Nagasaki, and sauntered toward the villa of my chosen one, the fair Liu, whose voice was the voice of the cooing dove, whose form swayed as she moved like the tall sycamore that waves in the breeze from the south.

Only once had I seen her, as she stood in the garden of her parent's villa, with its hills and rocks, its pond and moss-covered stones and bowering trees. But I loved. I loved with the fierce burning love of youth, and thus, after the toil of the day was at an end, and the cool evening winds fanned my hot brow, I went out along the road to watch for a glimpse of her form again before I laid my neck on its pillow.

As I approached the hedge fence, all glowing in the sunlight with its pink clustered blossoms, I heard a voice sighing on the wind, as of one who yearns for a love that it knows not, and I recognised it as the voice of my loved one, my Liu. I craned my neck and looked over the hedge into the landscape garden on the other side, and there I saw her sitting by a spraying fountain, while the cool waters flowed over her pearly feet.

A crimson flush tinged my face as I drank in the charms of her person. My heart rapped against my breast, and my knees trembled lest she should observe my rudeness and hate me for it. But she did not look up from the rippling waters; she sang the sighing song till the gathering gloom roused her from her reverie, and she prepared to go into the house.

As I took the road again, still more deeply in love than ever, I was accosted by a young man who, by his similarity to my Liu, I rightly guessed to be her brother, whose name was Yaita.

"Health to you, Okada Shikoku; I greet you!" he said smiling pleasantly. "I know you by repute as a great wrestler. I am about to give up my pastime of two-handed sword fencing, and wish to become an adept at wrestling. You will give me lessons, will you not? My father has given his consent."

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Such an unexpected stroke of good fortune staggered me, who only a minute before was reviling the lot that had given me no opportunity of improving my acquaintance with the lovely Liu. I bowed slightly in reply to his compliments, and answered as calmly as I was able:

"Okada Shikoku will have the greatest pleasure in instructing the young man in the noble art of wrestling."

"It is dark now," he answered, moving off; "if you will visit me at my father's villa to-morrow, we will arrange matters to our mutual convenience."

We parted, each going his way. I was in a delirium of delight, not knowing where I went, nor caring, for was it not manifest the gods had ordained that Liu should love me in return? Was it not manifest that this desire to secure me as a tutor in wrestling was created in the young man's mind that I might have an opportunity of confessing my devotion to his lovely sister?

The next morning I made my way to the villa of Yaita's father, the wealthy farmer, who was well pleased with my appearance and manners, and agreed to take me into his household and feed and clothe me in return for educating his son in the art of wrestling. Wherein I was overjoyed, and expressed my gratitude for his generosity, although I should never have accepted so lowly an occupation had it not been for the love I bore my Liu, the divine one.

The opportunities I enjoyed for talking with Liu were manifold, and her chaperon, who was as ugly as the falcon and as cunning as the snake, found ways of leaving us together for some time when I gave her little presents, and flattered her. It was not long before I learned from Liu's own lips that the love I bore her was reciprocated; but, alas! our social positions debarred us from wedlock, for to such a union her father would never consent, even were he ever so pleased with me in my capacity as wrestler; for was I not a peasant's son, and she the daughter of a rich and powerful landowner?

I was in despair; yet I did not show it. I knew that it would cause her pain if she believed I was wretched and miserable.

Yaita, the young man, developed into a skilful athlete under my tuition, and was well pleased with me, for we were like brothers, though he was many years my junior, being but seventeen. We were in the habit of going out to many of the contests that were given by the townspeople, and in them all my young pupil overthrew his assailants and was pronounced the winner, except when I took part.

One warm day, there was a great cry in the road that stretches in front of my master's villa, and a runner carrying despatches came up shouting that we were at war with China, and that every man capable of bearing arms should journey at once to Nagasaki, where they would be enrolled in the Imperial forces for transport to Corea.

I myself did not like the idea, for it signified parting with my loved one; nor did my young pupil, Yaita, either, enjoy the news, for he, too, was in love with a damsel of high degree. But we were Japanese, and the country called us to arms.

I made hurried preparations for my departure, receiving from my master sufficient coin to keep me in comfort when I reached Nagasaki until I took up arms and joined one of the army corps that were to be convoyed to Seoul for the purpose of marching on Ping Yang.

In a secluded nook by the fountain where I had first let my raptured gaze fall on her, did I bid farewell to my lovely Liu. She lay in my arms, breathing soft words of everlasting and undying affection, until the ruddy glow of the setting sun fell from the rich cherry blossoms that hung in fragrance about our heads, and left the world in darkness.

At sunrise next morning, I joined a party of townsmen going southwards, having agreed to meet my young pupil at that time and place. But he did not arrive, and we started without him, hearing from one of the servants that he would follow in a few hours and catch us up, but that he was at that moment bidding adieu to his lady love.

There were many parties on the same mission as ourselves, whose destination was the barracks, at Nagasaki, and at each halt by the wayside I eagerly scanned the faces of those who followed, hoping to see my young friend, only to meet with disappointment, until we found ourselves within sight of the city, when he came after us, pale and worn-out with forced marching, but resolute, and ready to fight for the gods and the Emperor.

The love I bore her was reciprocated.

He handed me a short note on which Liu had charged me with the care of her brother.

"Be kind to him and love him as you would me," said the little missive, and the very words breathed of her devotion to me, so that I hugged it to my breast and cried aloud that I would love and cherish her till I came back covered with glory and honour, unless the Chinese warriors found a resting place for their swords in my bosom. Whereat Yaita grew pale; for he, too, loved.

At the barracks, teeming with soldiers and recruits from the countryside, we received our uniforms and equipments, and carried them back to the place where we were stopping, and donned them. Yaita looked grand in his dress, and I was proud to be his comrade.

After a week of hard drilling, of marching and countermarching with hundreds of others in the barrack yard, we embarked on one of the transports in the harbour and turned our backs upon our native land and our faces towards Corea, where our noble brothers had gone before and secured a footing.

The voyage was uneventful. We drilled on board nearly all day long, and fired our rifles at the gulls and at targets lashed to the bowsprit, and talked boldly of the fighting we would each do, filling ourselves with a mad desire to drive our bayonets into the breasts of the Black Flags.

As for Yaita, he seemed to have no stomach for fighting, and I found him at night, when the rest of the men slept below, resting with his elbows on the bulwarks, watching the horizon with dreamy tear-dimmed eyes, and I knew that his heart, like mine, was bursting with grief, and that the agony of parted

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love was gnawing like a worm at his heart strings. I found solace in reading and re-reading my missive. Yaita had no such love-token, or, if he had, he never showed it to me.

But when I was near him, and spoke kindly to him, taking his soft hand in mine, his eyes kindled afresh, and he agreed with me, that to

Yaita was at my side in a moment.

mourn for a love from whom he would be parted for only a few months, was folly.

I will not relate in detail how we landed and were marched to the front, nor the hardships of those long forced marches. I come now, however, to speak of the crisis in this my story. And even before I have put my brush to paper, I feel my cheeks burning with a shame of which I am too fearfully cognisant, and my hand trembles so that I am tempted to throw down my writing tool and let what I shall say remain unwritten.

While we were yet many miles from the Chinese fortifications at Ping Yang, the company in which both I and Yaita served was ordered out to skirmish forward and dislodge an outpost of the enemy. It was the first glimpse we had had of the Black Flags, and, as we broke off from the main body and advanced cautiously, rifles at the ready, a strange feeling of anxiety for my comrade filled my soul, for I remembered sweet Liu's epistle, and felt myself responsible for the life of her brother.

As we crept forward under cover of the low bushes, disturbing the little birds that flew crying upwards, thereby disclosing our presence, we saw that the enemy were slowly retreating, and feared that we were getting drawn into an ambush. Our young lieutenant was looking anxiously about him, and the men did not gain much encouragement from the expression on his face.

Suddenly, a badly-fired volley burst upon us from the right, and three men dropped in the dust. We returned the fire, aiming low, and a hot fusillade was kept up—we slowly advancing, and driving the enemy before us.

A hundred yards away, almost in front of me, I caught sight of a Chinaman, whose rifle was levelled straight at me. In a second I dropped on my knee, and fired; but he was quicker, and I rolled over with a bullet in my shoulder, crying aloud with pain. Yaita was by my side in a moment. He tore open my tunic, and examined the wound. It was not mortal, but severe.

A sickening sensation crept over me, and, as I closed my eyes, I saw, or fancied I saw, Yaita deliberately thrust his bayonet into his arm, and fall by my side.

They took us back, five of us, to Seoul, and we lay in the hospital there—Yaita by my side, his arm bandaged up. Around us, on mattings, lay a score of men from other regiments than our own, whose flesh was torn by Chinese bullets and Chinese steel. Two of our surgeons bandaged us up in turn, while four women tended to the wants that were whispered now and again.

One of them came to me. Her large soft eyes were filled with compassion as she gazed upon my pain-racked face, and in them I saw a tinge of admiration at so fine a fellow; for, having been a wrestler against whom few could stand, I was of fine physique, such as women admire. A thrill of delight passed through my body as she bent down and put her face so near to mine to ask if I was in need of food or drink.

I could have raised my arms and placed them round her neck and kissed her. I forgot the girl Liu who lived in the villa on the broad Ten San road that leads from Fukuokal to Nagasaki, and, even had I thought of her, the great beauty and intoxicating presence of the woman who was kneeling by my side would have killed the thought before it had time to mature.

"Great warrior," she spoke, in a rich, low tone, "thou has suffered much, but thou wilt suffer more."

There was a strange expression in her almond eyes, as she smiled and rose and visited the other men, whom I hated with all my strength, for did I not look upon them as rivals in my love?

And then, as I turned my head, I saw Yaita watching me with a sad face, and I remembered that he was the brother of the girl Liu whom I had thought I loved, and, knowing that he could read my feelings, I was sorry for him, for I liked him much. But we did not speak, and I closed my eyes and the pain of my wound was annulled by the exquisite emotions that pervaded my soul.

I was vain and pleased enough to believe that the lovely woman who nursed us gave me more of her time than she accorded to the others, and the sweetest of her smiles; and, in the evening, when the balmy breezes floated down from the hills and fanned my love-burning cheeks, she would sit awhile with me and talk of her home in Mukimaki, which she had left heart-whole and self-denying to nurse the wounded for her beloved Japan.

Then I told her much concerning my reputation as a wrestler, and gave her to believe that I was great in the land, and that I had a good name, and her large eyes sparkled and her lips trembled with the love that I saw was being conceived within her soul.

"I am Liu."

Of Liu I gave little thought. Had she been of noble mind she would have come across the sea and taken her place in the hospitals. Of her brother I thought much, for I knew

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that he loved his sister devotedly, and that he would protest against my actions when they became more pronounced. But I had already determined my plans, and was waiting for him to speak.

Poor boy! He too, was in love, and the sight of my blissful happiness stirred up thoughts within him that the gods had mercifully caused to lie dormant for long.

One day the fair woman, whose name I learnt was Miyo, came and sat by my side and talked of many things in a low, sweet voice, every note of which sent the blood tingling through my veins. We spoke of many things, and then my love burst forth, and in the dim twilight, unseen by the shadowing forms that lay stretched about us, I seized her hand and covered it with kisses.

I felt her tremble, but she did not withdraw her hand. I drew her head down on my breast, and whispered of my love.

Then there came a low cry close at hand, and, turning, I saw Yaita, who had knelt up on the floor, fall forward and strike his head against the wall. Miyo rose quickly and administered restoratives, while I alone knew the reason of his weakness, for he had seen us, and his misery was great, for he yearned in his heart after the lady-love who lived for him alone in fair Japan.

Presently Miyo turned to me:

"Dear one, he wishes to speak to thee!" she said.

My wound had almost healed, and I was able to move with ease. I crawled over to my poor friend.

His face was very white, whiter even than when he had first come there, and I had never seen it so sunken, for the self-inflicted wound, though petty, seemed to have been sapping his young life.

"Okada," he whispered. "Forgive me! I am Liu. I die that you may be happy."

Then the poor emaciated form fell back and grew cold.

With the knowledge of this life of self-denial, of the pure unwavering love of my Liu, came the bitter hatred of the woman who had trodden and defiled the sacred ground between us. How many weary hours of terrible heart-burning had my darling suffered! She had watched my faithlessness with unmurmuring eyes, and I covered my face in shame and wept aloud.

My wound is healed now. I go to the front. I have not spoken another word to Miyo. I hate her. I am fickle in my love, but I shall not be so for long. Chinese lead or steel shall find me out, and by its agency I shall go to the gods who ordain all things, to meet my love, my Liu.

A BOX ON THE EAR

I.

HIS head protected by a broad-brimmed straw hat, his feet clothed in elegant shoes of natural leather, Lieutenant Blanc-Minot sat upon the Kursaal terrace of a fashionable Spa, gazing dreamily at his glass of absinthe, into which he was dropping every now and then water from an iced carafon.

"Do you see that wretch?" whispered Jacques, at the same time giving me a dig with his elbow. "That fellow robbed me of at least a million. Through him my marriage with the only daughter of a millionaire was knocked on the head."

While Blanc-Minot, with a smile of satisfaction raised the glass of absinthe to his mouth, smacking his lips when the liquor was over, as if to show how little remorse he felt for my friend's baffled expectation, the melancholy Jacques drew me into a corner and continued:

"Where did I first see Fraulein Elodie Van der Veysse, Dutch on her father's side, a Parisian through her mother and her own inclinations? I don't know. I fancy it must have been at Countess Monchat's ball, where I danced a waltz with her.

"There is no question, at all events, that the young lady, who was of romantic inclinations, fell head over ears in love with me without the slightest effort on my part to fan the flame. She was very beautiful, and, in her wealth of golden hair, looked as if she had stepped from the frame of a picture by Rubens. She belonged to a family so immensely rich as to stifle in the bud any hope of her hand.

"Her father was at that time in Amsterdam, engaged in 'rounding off' his affairs, as if thirty-five millions had not been 'round' enough. However, I was by no means sorry that I could not be presented to him, for, from all accounts, he was an excessively vain person, horribly sensitive, and with very nasty habits.

"I learned further that he was very quarrelsome, and subject to attacks of violent temper—altogether one of those people with whom I could not easily have pulled. I kept repeating all those little items to myself, by way of comfort, under the conviction that I could not become his son-in-law.

"But Fraulein Elodie had so faithfully preserved her recollection of me that one day my mother said to me, with a beaming countenance:

"'I have just received a letter from Countess Monchat, dear Jacques. As I gather from it, the young lady with whom you waltzed at the Countess' ball has declared to her parents that she will give her hand at the altar to no other man than yourself. Her parents are furious about it, but that is neither here nor there. She is the only daughter of this millionaire. What a future for you, my dear Jacques! I expect more information from the Countess on the matter.'

"And my mother embraced me tenderly as if I had just returned home after many years' absence. All this happened at Carcassonne, where I was spending my holiday, in my mother's house."

II.

"Without requiring a more substantial guarantee of the certainty of this distinguished marriage, I resolved, to some extent, for safety's sake, to bury my bachelor existence. Funeral solemnities of this description, as you know, are usually of a very lively character, but I wished that mine should be extravagantly gay. Blanc-Minot, who was at that time with his regiment in garrison at Carcassonne, confirmed my resolution, and our days and nights were spent in devising entertainments that plunged the whole town into wild uproar.

"After we had exhausted all the joy of existence we began to play. I frankly confess that I played to win, for I was very hard up, and was anxious in this way to defray the expenses of future entertainments. But I lost—lost from the very first.

"That infernal rascal Blanc-Minot had incredible luck, and cleared me out with marvellous celerity. One evening I had already lost to Blanc-Minot my ready cash, my gold watch, and even the magnificent braces which my dear mother had embroidered with her own hands, yet I betrayed an indomitable desire to continue playing. Certainly at that moment I was mad—I had lost my head—the demon of play had got possession of me.

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"'Look here,' I cried, to Blanc-Minot, 'let's play for a box on the ear.'

"Blanc-Minot recoiled in dismay, and looked at me inquiringly.

"'The loser,' I continued, 'will bestow a box on the ear upon the first person he fancies, provided he does not know him; if the smitten stranger be not satisfied, so much the worse.

"'In that case, and should the gentleman resent the blow, then the one who gave it has lost a second time. But if the stranger pockets the insult, his insulter has won.'

"'Done, I accept,' exclaimed Blanc-Minot.

"It is quite needless to say that I lost. There was no course open for me now except to find a stranger whom I might buffet without risk of encountering reprisals. A delightful undertaking, wasn't it? But I might add, by way of justification, that we were both rather jolly. While I was considering how I might best secure my object, a bright idea suddenly dawned upon me.

"'When does the Paris express pass?' I asked of Blanc-Minot in an excited tone.

"'In a quarter of an hour.'

"'Quick, then, let us make for the station as fast as our legs will carry us.'

"Blanc-Minot followed me without the remotest suspicion of my intention."

III.

"The heavy train rolled groaning into the station. There was a stoppage of five minutes at Carcassonne. Since I was on intimate terms with the station-master, we were allowed to walk the platform unchallenged. A stout gentleman with a red, bloated, unpleasant face, after concluding a violent altercation with a porter, had got into a compartment, and was now leaning the upper portion of his body over the window, panting for breath. I did not lose sight of him.

"The bell rang, the engine whistled, and, to the clanking of chains and grating of wheels, the train slowly got into motion. Favoured by the uncertain light I slipped unnoticed on to the carriage step, hit the stout gentleman a sharp blow upon his bloated visage, and leaped back again upon the platform. He burst into a howl of rage, doubled his fist, and yelled after me, while the train bore him swiftly onwards:

"'I will know you again, you scoundrel.'

"'You have won,' said Blanc-Minot, in a tone of indifference. 'Without doubt he will pocket your blow.'

"We left the station unobserved by anyone.

"When I got home it had just struck eight. My mother was already in the breakfast-room. I was not much inclined to encounter her, as I had spent all the previous day and night out of the house, without having so much as mentioned where I might be found. In spite of this, my mother received me in the friendliest way possible, and uttered not a word of reproach.

"'Good news for you, my child,' was her greeting.

"'Ah! a letter from the Countess?'

"'Far better, my son. M. Van der Veysse, Elodie's father, has waited upon me personally, and asked your hand for her. This seems to be the custom in Holland. He arrived last night, and resumed his journey to Paris this morning. To excuse your absence, I told him you had gone to one of our farms. Indeed, I was very glad you were not present, for I am quite sure your thoughtlessness would have brought you into mischief, if it did not spoil the whole thing.'

"And my mother embraced me passionately as if she had not seen me for seven years.

"In the bottom of my heart I was as happy as she. For, as I have already told you, Fraulein Elodie was very beautiful, and possessed attractions which, conjoined with a million of *dot*, were absolutely inestimable."

IV.

'My mother had invited Cousin Enselm, at that time a commissioner of police, to dine with us next day, in order to inform him of my impending happiness. But no sooner had she mentioned the name of M. Van der Veysse than my cousin interrupted her:

"'Van der Veysse? Van der Veysse? Did the gentleman leave yesterday morning by the 7.5 express?'

"'Exactly!' exclaimed my mother, while a vague unrest took possession of me.

"'He has just lodged a complaint with us. It appears that just when his train was moving off some blackguard hit him a a box on the ear. But he swears he will return and recognise his villainous assailant at the first glance.'

"My complexion during my cousin's statement assumed the colour of apple-green

"Without bestowing any particular attention upon my piteous aspect, my cousin continued:

"'We will soon discover the scoundrel. Such insolence and rudeness is perfectly unheard of. To strike a respectable man—at a moment, too, when he was helpless to defend himself. Jacques, your step-father is the party here aggrieved, and you owe it to yourself, to him, to all of us, to assist in searching for this rogue, and to run your sword through him.'

"'Ah! mon Dieu,' exclaimed my mother, 'that will not prevent justice taking its course, and it will and shall offer you an opportunity of giving to your bride a proof of your affection in a chivalrous and thoroughly French fashion.'

"My face was now the colour of scarlet. I reeled from my chair, and hurriedly left the room, not so hurriedly, however, but that I caught my mother's remark:

"'Poor boy, he is quite beside himself with rage!'

. . . . . .

"Two days later I left Carcassonne. I explained to my mother that, after mature reflection, I had become convinced that my happiness was only to be found in celibacy.

"As I afterwards learned, the affair of the luckless Van der Veysse had taken a very lamentable course for a cause so just. My cousin had met his impetuous complaints and accusations with the fact that they could not punish his aggressor so long as they did not know him.

"Finally the authorities, through my cousin, pronounced the following interlocutor: 'There can be no doubt that the box on the ear was meant for someone else. We advise you in future not to meddle with other people's business, and also to molest us no further. This is evidently a case of mistaken identity, and so *basta!*'"

Jacques had concluded his harrowing tale, and the disturber of his happiness, Blanc-Minot, carried the glass of absinthe to his lips with a kindly smile. The sun broke upon the crystal, which sparkled like a gem.

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A TRAMP IN THREE STAGES

STAGE THE FIRST.

RT tired, Lisette?"

"Just a little bit. Couldn't we take a rest now? Then you will see how well I shall walk."

"Presently, Lisette. But give me Gaston for a little. You have carried him long enough. He will tire you out."

"Long enough," laughed Lisette. "Listen to him—this dear, stupid husband of mine! It is not five minutes since I took him, the precious little bundle that he is."

"Now, I knew you were jealous. Don't, you see that my hands are free. The pack on my back! Pouf. That is nothing; give me Gaston."

"Very well, tyrant," said the little wife, sighing wearily as she handed her sleeping infant to him. Her arms ached, even in that short time, with him. Would she never be any stronger?

"Now, courage, my dear Lisette. Do you see that building on the roadside yonder?"

"The white house in the meadow with the poplars? Yes, Pierre."

"Well, that is where we shall stop. I know the place. The people who live there are good people; they will be kind to us. Many a rosy-cheeked apple I got from old Madame Sulpice when I used to go with father in the cart. Poor father! what would he have said if he had known I was to lose the little farm where his forefathers lived so long?"

"But it wasn't your fault, Pierre," said little Lisette eagerly. "You could not help it. And so many misfortunes falling all at once on your poor head, my husband; first my illness, and then the cow dying, and that wicked Notaire seizing the furniture for the rent. I am sure if M. le Comte had been at home he would not have dared, Pierre. If only we could have written to him. Oh, Pierre, how I detest that little M. Duval!"

"And how he loved you, Lisette! How could you prefer a poor simpleton like Pierre to M. le Notaire, with his eye-glass and his riding-horse, and his nice little income? Wasn't that how he put it, *chérie?*"

"Don't speak of him, Pierre, and you know why I preferred you, you old tease."

"No, indeed; I profess I can't understand it. Say, Lisette, how was it?"

"Because I loved you, Pierre. I knew your heart was brave, although everything was so difficult. And I was not afraid to trust myself to you. I think a true heart like yours, Pierre, worth all the millions in the Bank of France. I say to myself, here is something you will never lose—something which will never fail you, whatever happens. And I think that is a splendid prize for a poor weak girl like me. Promise me once more, Pierre, there's a good boy, that you will always be true to me and to Gaston here, whatever happens."

"Whatever happens!" repeated Pierre reverently, as if he were in the little church at Dinan at early mass, with the morning light streaming in through the halo over the Christ-child and the soft notes of the organ stealing through it.

To Pierre, the one was as much of a sacrament as the other.

Then they plodded on in silence together for a little while longer, till they came to the cosy farmhouse. There they were welcomed with kindly hospitality by Pierre's old friends, and there was much talking and joking and questioning in the great farm kitchen over their plans. Pierre, with his little all, was going to try afresh his fortune in Paris—that far-off land of bliss to the poor provincial.

"So the world has not been using you well, Monsieur Pierrot," said Madame Sulpice, bustling about her guests and dividing her attentions between Lisette and the baby.

Pierre's face was lost in a jug of cider, but Lisette spoke for him:

"Oh, so badly, madame, you cannot guess. First I was ill, then the plague came, and we had no money and they were cruel—at least one man was, and he took everything away from us."

"And all because the foolish child gave him up for a stupid old Pierre, who is the best and dearest of husbands, though he is wicked sometimes."

"And so you are going to Paris to make your fortunes?"

"Yes, if I can make a home for Lisette and Gaston, it is all I ask of the great city. We are not ambitious, are we, Lisette?"

"The poor children," said madame, furtively wiping away a tear as she watched them shortly afterwards trudging along the white dusty road towards Paris, "they little know what awaits them there. God help them."

But Pierre and Lisette had, as yet, no dismal forebodings.

"Shall we see Paris soon, Pierre?" asked Lisette, as dusk was falling, and the tall poplars grew shadowy and mysterious overhead.

"Wait," said Pierre. They went a little further. Their footsteps fell softly in the white March dust. The breeze swayed the poplars gently to and fro, the leaves whispered softly. Suddenly, at a bend of the road, Pierre stopped and caught hold of his wife.

"Lisette, dost see that yellow glow over there!"

"Yes, Pierre. Is that Paris?" in a tone of awe.

"It is Paris, *ma chérie*. We shall soon be there now. Come."

And Lisette looked at the distant city, lighting up with a lurid glare the dark shades of the evening, with a feeling of dread.

STAGE THE SECOND.

"Art tired, Gaston?"

"No, *mon père*."

"And your coat keeps you nice and dry, doesn't it?"

"Yes, father. But you—you will be soaked before we get to the theatre. Why didn't you buy a coat, too, father?"

"The little droll! As if your father needed a coat to keep him dry with a splendid big umbrella. Hark, how the raindrops patter on it. Isn't it pleasant to think that none are coming through, except one on the point of my nose now and then."

"But the rain is beating in our faces, and you can't keep that off you. Father, did you get me a coat and yourself an umbrella because you weren't able to get a coat for yourself too?"

"Hold your tongue, you little chatterbox. Can't father mind his own business, eh? Do you know your part to-night, little one?"

"Oh, yes," said the boy, forgetting in a moment his father's condition in the excitement of the prospect of his *début* that evening in the little theatre at Porte Maillot, where they were engaged. They were trudging along the Champs Elysées, too poor to afford even a cheap drive in the 'bus, in the teeth of a cold driving wind and rain.

Poor little Lisette was lying in the cemetery at Montmartre

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with a wreath of immortelles on her grave. Pierre and Gaston were alone now. The father fought for his child against poverty and misfortune with unabated vigour. Gaston's pretty face and slim figure had taken the fancy of the public who frequented the theatre of Porte Maillot, and he was always chosen to fill any small parts where no speaking was required. To-night, however, he had a few lines to say, and he was very proud of the fact. His father was still morose.

"If Lisette could only see," he thought sadly. A small knot of people had gathered at the theatre door when Gaston and his father got there. They were greeted with a smile here and a nod there.

Pierre's heart swelled with triumph as they made their way through to the wicket.

How proud Lisette would have been if she had lived to see that day!

"Just see how they love you," he said, kissing the little upturned face, all aglow with excitement and the battle with wind and rain. "You will be a great actor one of these days, and there will be no one handsomer or more beloved in the Allee des Acacias; and at night all Paris will go to hear you, and there will be a great stillness in the theatre when you are on the stage, and we shall hold our breaths till you are finished, and then—won't there be a triumph—an ovation!"

"But, papa, you are coming on, aren't you?"

"No, my boy, not to-night. Unless you want me very much," he added anxiously.

The boy's face clouded a little with disappointment, then cleared. He flung his arms round his father's neck, and clung to him for a minute.

"You are afraid you will cry, papa. And you are all shaking and shivering, as if with cold. And it is all because you love me so. No; you will wait for me here by the fire! And as soon as I have done I shall come back to you, and tell you what they did. Warm yourself well, father. Good-bye."

"Adieu, my little angel!" murmured his father.

Then, into the silence of the little dressing-room, there came the noise of applause, loud and prolonged. Gaston was on.

Oh, if Lisette had only been there!

Then Pierre thought of his dead wife, of all she had gone through so bravely with him from first to last; how, when his heart sickened, hoping against hope from day to day, and still the heart of the gay city seemed as hard as its very stones, she always kept up and made it easier for him in every way she could. Although she must have known, too, that she would not have long to stay with them. Dear little Lisette!

Then he thought of his old home in Dinan, and the farm-yard with its cocks and hens, and his mother clanking across the court with her wooden sabots, and the lowing from the stables. And through it all the never-ceasing murmur of the great ocean outside.

And as he thought he fell asleep, weary with excitement and overpowered by the heat of the fire. When he awoke it was with a sense of suffocation. The room was quite dark and full of smoke. Gasping for breath, he listened and heard what made his heart stand still for a moment—shouts of men, screams of women and children, all fighting with the fury of beasts to get out of the burning building—fighting, alas! with one another. Not a moment was to be lost. Gaston must be saved, whoever perished, and at any cost. Making his way out of the room as best he could, he dashed down the stairs half choked by the volumes of smoke and flame which met him, but holding on his way with firm determination. At the foot he passed a fireman.

"Stop! You can't get past there. Hold! The madman; where has he gone?"

Pierre heeded him not, but made his way through the burning debris, escaping by a miracle almost unhurt to the green room, which he found deserted. The actors had had sufficient warning, it appeared, to enable them to quit the place in time. But had Gaston gone with them? The distracted father ran hither and thither, calling on him, hoping he was in safety, and yet dreading that he was still in the building. Would he not have come to him? At last he caught sight of him, standing above him on the landing of the room which he had left.

Pierre did not hesitate. He did not hear the child's agonised cry, "Father, father!" The roar of the flames was too loud for that. He did not even see the little hands stretched out to him in mute appeal. He only was conscious that Gaston was there, and that Gaston must be saved.

"Lisette, help me," he muttered; then with clenched teeth he dashed up the blazing staircase.

The fireman, who was still at his post, looked after him in amazement.

"Sac-r-r-é!" he said, "that man must be mad!"

His chief appeared and took in at a glance what was happening.

"Keep plying the platform where the boy is standing, you booby," he shouted. "He may save him yet."

It was difficult to make them out for the smoke, but the fireman did as he was bid and turned his hose on the spot where Gaston was standing. Fiercely the flames hissed as the stream of water rose over them. Clouds of steam were now mingled with the smoke. But the crashing of falling beams, and the crackling of the blazing timber continued unabated.

There was a moment of suspense—a terrific crash, a shower of sparks, and Gaston, wrapped in his father's clothes from head to foot, rolled at their feet. Pierre, half-dressed, lay a little way off. They were both immediately carried out and restoratives applied. Gaston was insensible, but soon recovered, and was otherwise unhurt. But his father was too terribly burned ever to recover.

STAGE THE THIRD.

And so our tramp has reached the third and last stage of his weary journey. "Art tired, Lisette?" he whispers softly to Gaston, whom he cannot see. And when Gaston can only answer with his sobs, he whispers again—"Courage, dear one, we have only a little way to go now—just a little."

. . . . . .

And, indeed, it was not far.

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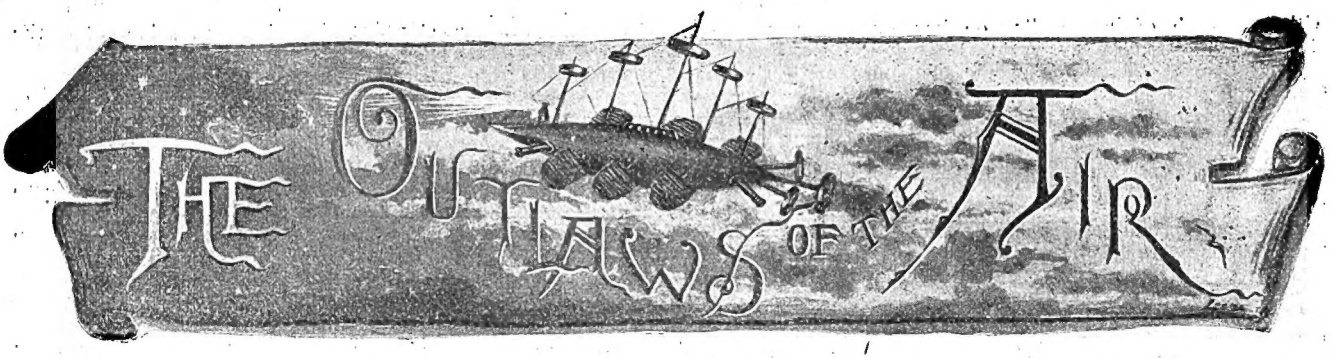


By George Griffith,

Author of "The Angel of the Revolution," "The Syren of the Skies," &c.

SUMMARY.

MAX RENAULT—leading spirit of Anarchist Autonomie Group No. 7, who has joined the Utopians (a Socialistic colony on an island in the South Pacific) in order to steal the air-ship they are building, which he succeeds in doing.
FRANZ HARTOG—a German engineer, in league with Renault, who steals a very fast torpedo-boat destroyer from the Russian Government to levy blackmail on the Atlantic.
SIR HARRY MILTON—a wealthy young English nobleman, who by chance comes across the island of Utopia in his yacht, the *Calypso*, and subsequently devotes the whole of his fortune to hunting down Renault and Hartog.
HERBERT WYNDHAM—a lieutenant in the British Navy who is travelling with Sir Harry for the benefit of his health, and who determines to resign his commission and couple his energies with those of Sir Harry in destroying the Anarchists, on account of the fact that he has been stabbed by Renault when the latter attempts to carry off Violet in the air-ship.
FREDERICK AUSTEN—the inventor of the air-ship, who shares its secret with Edward Adams, Dr. Edwards, and Ambrose Millar, three other Utopians.
FRANK MARKHAM—the young captain of the Utopian yacht, *Mermaid*.
VIOLET MILTON—Sir Harry's sister, and Lieutenant Wyndham's sweetheart, is fearfully injured by throwing herself out of the air-ship on which Renault has tried to carry her off.
LEA CASSILIS (alias Mme. DAIL)—a member of Autonomie Group No. 7, with whom Renault is in love.
DORA MERTON—a fair Utopian, who has made an impression on Sir Harry.
LUCY SUMMERS—another fair Utopian.

Renault, after levying blackmail with Hartog on the high seas, returns to Utopia with the object of destroying the colony, but finds it deserted. After a time he goes to Europe in the air-ship *Vengeur*, and, together with Lea Cassilis, visits the Criterion Theatre in London, where he is recognised by Sir Harry and Lieutenant Wyndham, who effect his capture. He is tried, and condemned to death, but is rescued while on the way to the scaffold by his confederates in the air-ship. London is then bombarded by the *Vengeur*.

CHAPTER XXXV.

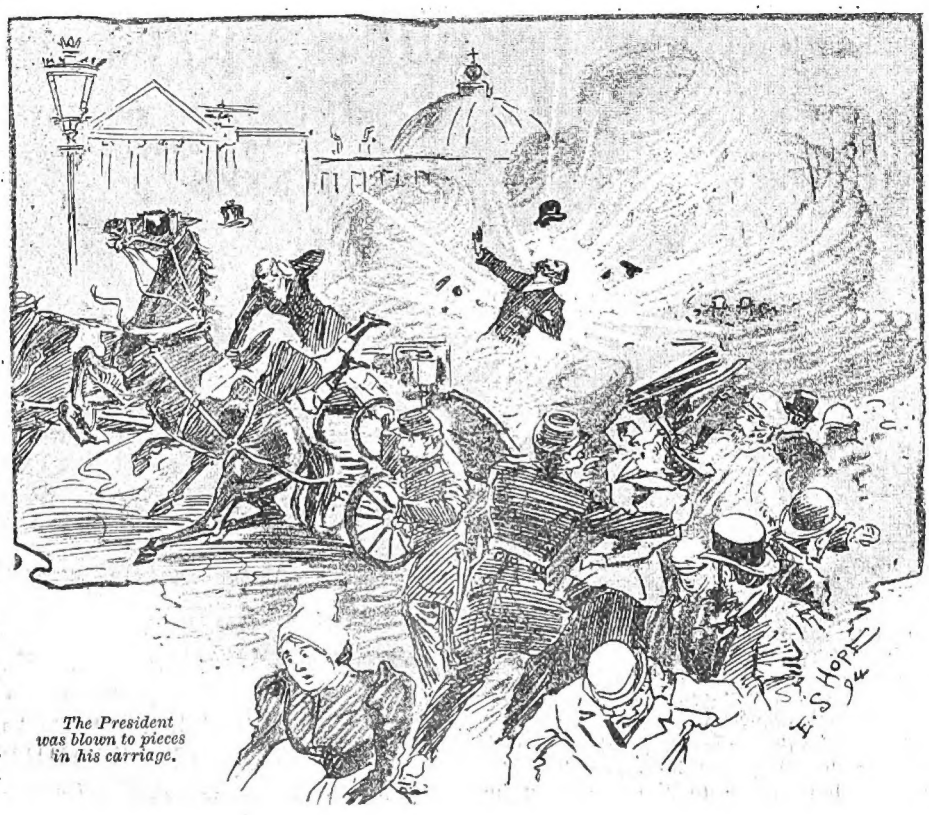
A Reign of Terror.

THE excitement produced by the terrible events of Death Tuesday, as the fatal day of the Anarchists' revenge had been promptly and permanently named, was completely indescribable. Not only England but the Continent—indeed, it might almost be said the whole civilised world—was convulsed by it.

Nothing like this had ever happened in the history of the world before. The ocean terrorism maintained by the *Destroyer* on the Atlantic was as nothing to it. From under the very shadow of the scaffold, in the centre of the most populous city in the world, a notorious criminal had been snatched from the grasp of Justice by means so unheard of and marvellous, that only the awful reality of what had followed made it impossible to doubt the fact that it had occurred.

This man, arraigned at the bar of English justice to answer for the most terrible of crimes, had calmly admitted them, and then, snapping his fingers at the majesty of the law, he had threatened to take a tremendous vengeance even for the indignity of having sentence of death passed upon him—and he had kept his monstrous threat to the letter.

There could be no doubt about that. The blackened and smoking ruins of the most important buildings in London, of the very seat of Government itself, the darkened and wreck-strewn streets, the thousands of human bodies, torn and mangled almost beyond recognition, and the mutilated remains of men, women, and children who had perished in the burning houses or been crushed to death by the panic-stricken throngs in the streets—all these were evidence, too fearfully unmistakeable, of the fact that the enemy of Society had, for the time being at least, armed himself with a power superior to anything that the forces of law and order could bring against him.



The President was blown to pieces in his carriage.

In what had been to him merely the pastime of a spring day, this one man with half-a-dozen followers had done what it would have taken

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the leagued armies and fleets of the Continent weeks of the most appalling strife and bloodshed to do. He had bombarded London, and the amount of damage he had done had been limited only by his inclination or the failure of his ammunition. What had happened to London might happen to Paris the next day, to Berlin the next, to St. Petersburg the next, and so on. It was only a question of time and ammunition. From the monarch in his palace to the peasant in his cottage, no one was safe, and no one had the remotest idea where the next blow would fall.

To say that a reign of terror, a condition of almost universal panic, had been established at one stroke by the Anarchists, would be simply to state the bare facts of the case. Men were afraid to meet anywhere in large numbers lest, as in London, destruction swift and inevitable should be hurled upon them from the sky.

The Parliaments of the world met in scanty numbers, and in fear and trembling. They passed their resolutions hurriedly, and separated as soon as possible, for politics had suddenly become invested with an actual personal danger, and, as politicians and heroes are seldom made of the same stuff, legislators mostly preferred the safer obscurity of their own homes to the perilous prominence of their official positions.

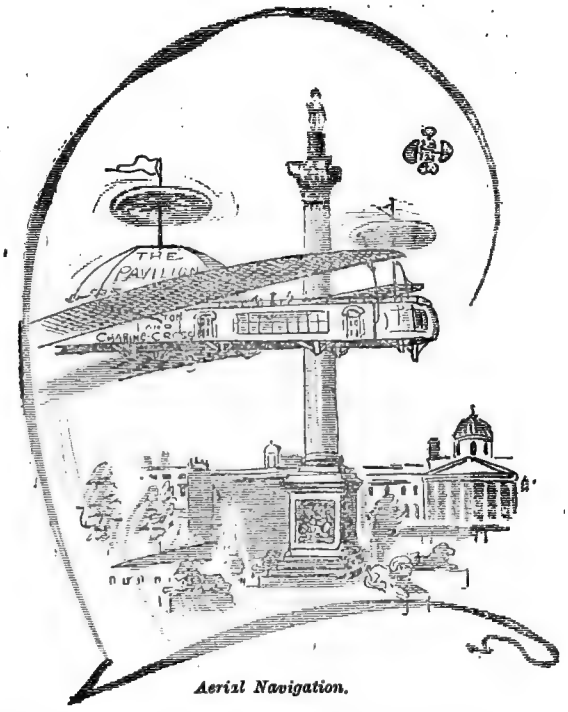
Suppose the British Houses of Parliament had been sitting when the *Vengeur* made her attack on the Palace of Westminster, how many members of either House would have escaped death or mutilation? What was there to prevent a similar assault being made at any moment on any other of the Parliament houses of the world, from the Chamber of Deputies in Paris to the House of Representatives in Washington? There was nothing, and so it came to pass that the Parliamentary Governments of the world were half paralysed by the terrorism of Anarchy in its most frightful form.

But, although this was primarily due to the assault of the air-ship on London, it was not wholly caused by it. While Renault had been at work in the air, Lea had been no less active on land. Through her agency all the Anarchist groups in the world had been prepared beforehand for the startling events of Death Tuesday, and they had unanimously resolved to celebrate the rescue of the man they now looked up to as their leader and chief, in spite of their rigidly individualistic principles, in a fashion worthy of themselves and their horrible creed.

The result had been that there was hardly a great centre of population in the civilised world that had not been the scene of some explosion, assassination, or other outrage, and, worse than all, as the events of the immediate future showed, President Casimir-Périer, the one man whose wisdom and strength of character had prevented the French Republic from throwing in its lot with Russia, was blown to pieces in his carriage on the evening of Death Tuesday by an infernal machine, which had been placed under the seat by one of his own servants, an Anarchist, who had literally bribed his way into the position with money furnished by Lea.

Within a week, the war party in France was in the ascendant, and before another week had passed, France had joined hands with Russia, and declared war on Britain, as the harbourer of Anarchists, and the enemy of the peace of Europe. By this time, too, the Baltic was clear of ice, and the Russian northern fleet was only waiting for the co-operation of the French channel squadron to force the British blockade of the Sound, and carry the war to the shores of Britain.

Such was the general position of affairs on the 12th of May, when a meeting of the directors of the Aerial Navigation Syndicate took place at the offices of the Maxim-Nordenfeldt Company in Victoria Street, Westminster. Mr. Maxim himself was in the chair, and the others present were Mr. Austen, Sir Harry, Edward Adams, Lieutenant Wyndham, Captain Maxwell, and Lieutenant Pelham, both of whom had put the greater part of their private fortunes into the Syndicate. Captain Maxwell had been cashiered, as has already been said, by the Admiralty for losing the *Devon;* but as soon as the really terrible powers of the *Vengeur* had become known, and it was seen that the cruiser had been practically helpless



Aerial Navigation.

under her assault, the Admiralty, being badly in want of such officers as he was, had offered to set aside the verdict of the court-martial and reinstate him; but, after careful consideration and consultation with his friend Wyndham, through whom he had made the acquaintance of Sir Harry and the rest, he had declined the offer, so as to be able to have a free hand in the work that was before him.

Pelham had resigned his commission just before the outbreak of the war, in order to take command of the *Britannia*, and was only waiting for the completion of the *Aries* to hoist the flag of the Syndicate on board her and take her to sea as a privateer, while Wyndham had received permission from the Admiralty to retain command of the *Nautilus* on condition that he acted in concert with the Channel Squadron. The proceedings had opened with a terse comprehensive view of the position of the Syndicate by the Chairman, and, in concluding this, he said:—

"Now, gentlemen, from what I have said and you already know, I think you will agree with me that it won't be very long now before the old order of things is completely done away with and all the fighting of the future, if there is to be any, will have to be done either by semi-submarine craft of the type of the *Nautilus* and the *Aries*, or else by means of air-ships.

"That scoundrel Renault has proved that against a properly managed air-ship, carrying guns and a fair amount of ammunition, there is practically no defence. Now, he and ourselves are the only people in the world who possess these ships. We don't know how many he's got by this time, because he hasn't given any sign of his existence since his attack on London. But, however many or few he has, we know how he'll use them.

"We have two, the *Volante* and the *War-Hawk*, ready to take the air to-morrow. I fancy they're swifter and more powerful as fighting machines than his, and I don't know that any of us will have any reason to wish any alteration in the original plan, that they should be devoted to hunting this scoundrel down, and, if possible, destroying him. It is also agreed, I think, that the *Volante* shall be commanded by Mr. Adams, and the *War-Hawk* by Mr. Austen, and that each of these gentlemen will choose their own officers and crew."

A general nod of assent went round the table as Mr. Maxim paused for a moment, and then he went on:

"With regard to the rest of the fleet, I am happy to say we

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have so far repaired the damage caused by those rascals with their bombs that we shall have twenty more ships ready for work in a fortnight from now, and this will bring us face to face with a question, if possible more important than Anarchist hunting, and that is our attitude with regard to the war.

"As you no doubt know, we have received some very tempting offers for the use of our ships not only from the British Government, but from France and Russia as well. But I think you'll agree with me that the services in warfare of such an engine of destruction as our air-ships will undoubtedly be, are not to be measured by a few thousand pounds a month that a government would pay for the hire of them."

"Most assuredly!" said Mr. Austen, as the chairman paused as if awaiting a reply. "I think, at any rate, speaking for myself and my immediate friends, that the very worst policy would be to place the air-ships at the disposal of any government. To do so would be to give them the means of tyrannising over other Powers and subjecting them to an almost irresistible temptation to embark upon a career of indiscriminate conquest, which might end in enslaving the liberties of the world.

"For my own part, I don't believe that any government, whether despotic or democratic, is sufficiently civilised to be intrusted with such a power as that. The world is not ready or aerial navigation yet, and I have never ceased to regret, since Renault stole the air-ship from Utopia, that I did not keep my son's secret and let it die with me."

"You'd have been something more than mortal if you had done that, Mr. Austen," said Mr. Maxim drily. "Besides, you know, if your air-ships hadn't been built my aeroplanes would have been nearly as dangerous to the peace of the world; and as it was then just a matter of business with me, I should have sold them or hired them out to anyone who'd have paid for them, and left them to fight it out amongst themselves, just as they do with the Maxim gun."

"But as a matter of business," chimed in Sir Harry, "and humanity as well, I certainly think that our original plan will be by far the best so far as the war is concerned. What do you think, Mr. Adams?"

"Oh, undoubtedly," replied Adams. "Once we have driven the Anarchists from the air and given that blackguard, Renault, his deserts, I hope we shall carry it out as quickly as possible; but I am certainly of opinion that we ought to use every effort to hunt Renault and his accomplices down first. We really have nothing to do with the quarrel with France and Russia, and it is of very little moment to us which is in the right or the wrong.

"Of course, these gentlemen," he continued with a glance and a smile towards the naval officers, "will do their duty by their country as far as the *Aries* and the *Nautilus* are concerned. They are perfectly free to do as they please, but our business is rather with Society at large than with two or three nations; and, therefore, my voice will certainly be for hunting the Anarchists down first with every ship that we can get afloat, and then carrying out the original plan on the basis of which this Syndicate was formed."

"And that is my view, too," said Sir Harry, as Adams ceased speaking. "On both public and private grounds I think we are bound to put a stop to the terrorism which this Renault, unfortunately, has it in his power to exercise. I think that if England, France, and Russia are foolish enough to go to war about matters which they could settle in a few hours with a little common sense and fair-play, we may as well leave them to fight it out for the present.

"But even if the whole of Europe were at war, it would be of less importance than exterminating Renault and his accomplices, because it stands to reason that if we give them time to build a large fleet of air-ships, they will simply take advantage of the war to increase its horrors a hundredfold and spread their terrorism round the whole world, and, in that case, civilisation will simply come to an end, and the Anarchists will soon gain command of the world—and a very nice prospect that would be."

"Very well, then," said the chairman. "We will consider that as settled, and so this will be the last meeting of the Syndicate for the present. We have done our talking and our thinking, and now we shall go to work. You gentlemen will go on active service, and I shall remain here to superintend building operations and business in general. I hope our next meeting will be to arrange terms of peace, and put international matters on a little more satisfactory basis than they are now. I think that is everything, isn't it?"

"No," said Mr. Austen, taking a sealed envelope from his breast pocket. "There is one thing more. Mr. Adams and I start to-morrow upon what may be a very perilous undertaking. All warfare is uncertain, and this warfare will probably be the most uncertain of all; and, therefore, Mr. Maxim, we have decided to leave with you the formula for the preparation of the motor-fuel, so that you may have it prepared in proper quantities, and, of course, with due regard for secrecy, for the supply of the fleet.

"All we shall ask in return will be your word of honour that you will learn the formula by heart, and at once destroy this paper, that you will never disclose it to anyone, and that you will supply none of the fuel on any conditions to anyone outside the Syndicate."

"You have my word on all those points, I can assure you," replied the chairman, as he took the priceless envelope. "If ever I let it out you are at liberty to blow me to smithereens with one of my own guns."

After this, a few more minor details of business were arranged, and the meeting broke up. That evening the members of the Aerial Navigation Syndicate dined together at the Hotel Victoria, in company with several old friends from Utopia, and not the least hearty of their toasts was that in which they drank success to the cruise of the *Volante* and the *War-Hawk*.

Drank success to the cruise of the "Volante" and the "War-Hawk."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE "WAR-HAWK'S" FIRST FLIGHT.

THE most elaborate precautions had been taken by the Syndicate to prevent the Anarchists and their spies from doing anything to hinder the building of the *Volante* and the *War-Hawk*, the first two vessels of their fleet that were to take the air, and also to keep secret the manner and place of their building.

As has already been said, the various parts

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of the ships and their engines and armament had been made by different firms and these, when completed, were despatched by rail to two different points. The Syndicate had acquired, privately of course, and in names unknown to the world, Lundy Island, off the coast of Devon, and one of the Farne Islands, off the coast of Northumberland, for the purpose of putting the vessels together and equipping them under circumstances which made it possible to keep all strangers and possible traitors away from the spot.

Thus everything that was necessary for the building and equipment of the *Volante* had been conveyed by rail to Bristol, and there shipped on board the *Irene* and taken to Lundy Island, while the materials of the *War-Hawk* had been sent by rail to North Shields and conveyed thence by another steamer to the Farne Island. No one was allowed on either of the steamers save those who had been members of the colony of Utopia, and were personally known to the directors; while on the islands the strictest possible watch was kept in order to make sure that no strangers or suspicious persons landed upon them.

All the building operations had been carried out on both vessels simultaneously, and the day after the last meeting of the Syndicate, Edward Adams and Mr. Austen, with their chosen lieutenants, went, the one west and the other north, to see everything in order, and, as it were, put their respective ships into commission. Adams took with him Tom Harris and Ralf Smith—late of the *Mermaid*—as lieutenant and engineer, and Dr. Edwards as surgeon. His crew he would find waiting for him on board the *Irene*, or else on the island.

The *War-Hawk*, with whose fortunes the reader will be more particularly concerned, was in a certain sense Sir Harry Milton's own ship, although, at his particular request, Mr. Austen had consented to take command of her. He had spent nearly a hundred thousand pounds out of his own pocket on her and had spared no expense to make her the most perfect and the most powerful aerial cruiser in existence, and therefore the most certain instrument of his vengeance on the man who had wronged him so wantonly and so deeply.

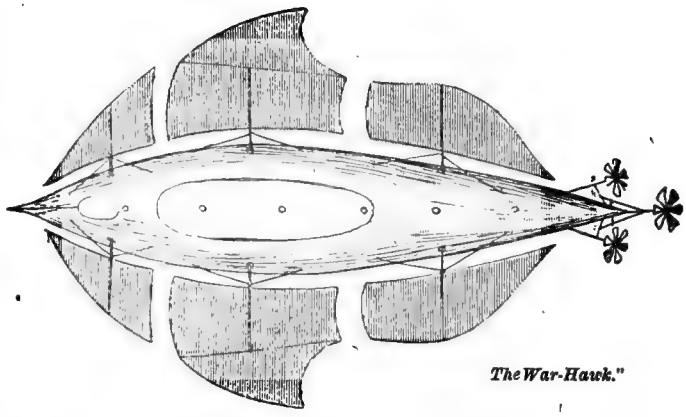
From point to point the elongated cylinder which formed the *War-Hawk's* hull measured two hundred and twenty feet with an amidships diameter of thirty-five feet. Her triple engines were capable of exerting nine thousand horse-power, six thousand of which could be concentrated on her six lifting fans, which, under these conditions, were capable of lifting a dead weight of four tons in addition to the hull and engines.

The engines and gearing were so constructed that while either three or six thousand horse-power could be applied to the lifting fans, leaving three thousand for the driving propellors, the whole nine thousand could be concentrated on the latter, and then the aeroplanes, driven forward at a speed of more than three miles a minute, would more than support the whole weight of the vessel and her cargo.

For armament she carried two pneumatic shell-guns forward and two aft, which had been specially designed for the vessels of the Syndicate by Mr. Maxim and Mr. Austen, and which would throw a shell carrying twenty pounds weight of high explosives to a distance of seven miles when fired from an elevation of two thousand feet. On each broadside were four machine-guns of the Maxim type, effective at a range of three miles, and with a firing capacity of seven hundred and fifty shots a minute. She was also fitted with six vertical bomb-tubes, each furnished with a releasing apparatus which automatically despatched the projectile the moment that the tube was exactly vertical to the object aimed at.

Sir Harry had had two objects in view in making the *War-Hawk*, as he hoped he had made her, the most formidable engine of destruction in existence. First and foremost, of course, was his settled purpose of hunting Max Renault from the world, and taking due vengeance on him for the crimes that he had committed, but hardly second to this came the fact that he had determined to confide the safety of all that was dearest to him on earth to the speed and strength of the splendid craft upon which he had lavished money without stint.

Violet, who had of course been brought away from France



The War-Hawk."

as soon as it was known that there was any danger of war being declared, was now quite convalescent, although the great nerve specialist under whose care she had been in Paris, had been unable to hold out any hope that, without the intervention of a miracle, she would ever be able to walk again. As Dr. Roberts had feared, the injury to her spine had proved to be the most serious of all.

Her vigorous constitution had triumphed over all her other injuries, severe as they had been. Her general health, and even her spirits were fast coming back to her, but her lower limbs were almost useless, and so she was a prisoner to the invalid chair in which it was only too probable she was condemned to pass the remainder of her waking life.

As soon as she had learnt that her brother was building the *War-Hawk* and intended to take the air himself in pursuit of Renault, she had begged and pleaded so hard to be taken with him, that at last, acting on Dr. Roberts's advice, he had yielded.

"Don't you see my dear fellow," the late surgeon of the *Calypso* had said to him when he expressed his surprise at his advice, "that, after all, this air-ship of yours will probably be the safest place that she can be in? You'll always be on the look out for the enemy. You will know where he is, or at any rate where he is not, and if you meet him you'll only attack him under favourable circumstances; but if you leave your sister on land you will never know when some of these blackguardly Anarchist spies might find her out and kill her just out of pure spite, or when Renault himself might find out where she was, and blow up the building she was living in out of revenge for his former failure.

"Added to that, in these nervous complaints the all-important thing is to guard against mental worry. If you leave her at home and go careering through the air yourself she will be in a constant state of anxiety about you—sleepless nights and all that sort of thing—and instead of getting stronger and better she'll simply get weaker and worse out of sheer anxiety for you. Take my advice and take her with you, and take me, too, to look after her. You know I can make myself useful in other ways than as a sawbones."

After this there was nothing for it but to let Violet have her way and make one of the company of the *War-Hawk*. But this decision speedily opened another question, which was settled in a way that gave Sir Harry not a little secret satisfaction.

It was quite impossible that, in her helpless condition, Violet could go on board the *War-Hawk* without one of her own sex as attendant and companion, and for this office Dora Merton volunteered in such decisive terms that she speedily overcame what little opposition she met with. Thus it came to pass that when the air-ship lay on the island on the evening of the 14th of May, ready to take her first flight into the air, her company consisted of Mr. Austen and Sir Harry as joint commanders, Frank Markham as chief engineer, and a crew of eight Utopians who had been specially trained to the work, Dr. Roberts as ship's surgeon and general utility man, as he described himself, Violet Milton and Dora Merton —whom Violet had ever increasingly strong reasons for

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regarding as a sister in fact as well as in fancy as every day of their intercourse went by.

The central portion of the *War-Hawk's* hull had been flattened so as to form a promenade deck about seventy-five feet long by twenty broad, and on this Sir Harry, Mr. Austen, the doctor, and Dora were standing round Violet's chair, waiting for the sinking disc of the sun to disappear over the hills of Northumbria and so give the signal for the voyage to begin.

It was an exciting moment for all of them, for it was virtually the beginning of a new existence. Henceforward, they were to be no longer citizens of the earth only. They were about to conquer a new realm and become citizens of the air as well. Mr. Austen, Markham, and about half of the crew had made ascents from Utopia in the stolen *Vengeur*, but to all the others the experience was absolutely novel.

"Just imagine!" said Dora, pointing up to a few white fleecy clouds that dotted the darkening blue of the sky. "In a few minutes we shall be sailing up yonder among those clouds with all the land and sea spread out below us like some great huge map. Isn't it almost too wonderful to believe?"

"Hardly among the clouds, Miss Dora," said the doctor, shaking his head. "As scientific adviser to the expedition it is my duty to tell you that those clouds are between six and seven miles from the earth, and that they are floating in an atmosphere that you would find it decidedly unpleasant, if not impossible, to breathe, even if it were possible for the *War-Hawk* to fly up there."

"Oh," said Dora with a pretty little pout. "That's disappointment number one. For weeks past I have been living in the hope of seeing what was on the other side of the clouds, and now you tell me we can't get there. You scientific people have a most unpleasant way of taking the romance out of everything."

"Oh, it isn't quite so bad as that," chimed in Mr. Austen. "You'll see the other side of plenty of clouds before you've been very long on board the *War-Hawk*. For instance, you see that dark bank away to the westward. I don't suppose that's much more than two thousand feet from the earth, if that, and if you wrap yourself up very warmly later on, we'll take a leap over it for your special benefit before we go south to join Adams at Lundy. But now we must be getting afloat, so keep all your eyes open and you'll see what you've never seen in your lives before."

So saying, he went to the rail which surrounded the deck, and, leaning over, said to those who were standing about the ship on the land:

"Is everything clear?"

"Yes," came the reply; "all clear."

"Very well, then," said Mr. Austen, going to the top of the companion-way which led down to the engine-room. "Are you ready with the lifting fans, Markham? You can go ahead when you like. I'm going to take the wheel in the conning-tower now."

"All ready," came the reply, in Markham's voice, from the engine-room; and then came the click of a lever, the blades of the lifting fans sprang out horizontally from the masts, and began to spin round with ever-increasing speed, and a sound that gradually rose from a soft whirr to a shrill whistle.

"It doesn't look as though those wheels just turning round in the air like that could lift this great ship and everything on board from the earth, does it?" said Violet, leaning back in her chair and looking up at the revolving fans.

"The air is a solid, if you only hit it hard enough," said the doctor, quoting from an American authority on aeronautics. "Wait till those fans hit it hard enough, and we shall rise like a fish in the water, or more properly, perhaps, a bird on the wing."

The whistle of the fans, revolving with ever-increasing rapidity as Markham brought more and more of the engine-power to bear upon them, now rose almost to a scream. A hurricane of wind seemed to beat down upon the steep, sloping awning over the deck for a moment, and then they felt the deck lift and sway beneath their feet. They looked over the side, and saw that the land was sinking away from beneath them, then a bell sounded in the engine-room, and the propellers began to revolve. A gentle breeze seemed to sweep along the deck, and the island slipped away behind them.

Waiting the signal for the aerial voyage to begin.

"Look, we are off at last!" cried Dora, clapping her hands in sheer delight. "There's the sea below us now and the islands—look at them, they are like so many little dots on the water already. What a speed we must be going at, and fancy we are flying, actually flying! Isn't it glorious—no more obstacles for us now, either on sea or land, no hills to climb, no rough seas to go pitching over or plunging under. We can fly over everything."

"There's no doubt about that," said Sir Harry, "and I suppose this is actually the first time on record that an angel has flown without wings."

"Bravo, Harry!" laughed Violet, looking up at Dora's now rosy face. "That's very nice."

While this conversation had been going on, the *War-Hawk* had swung round and was running at about forty miles an hour to the south-westward. Before Violet could make any retort to Dora's last piece of banter, Sir Harry, who had been sweeping the clear seaward horizon with his field-glasses, leant forward suddenly as though something had caught his attention. He looked hard through the glasses for a moment and then, taking them from his eyes, said:

"Violet, you must go below at once. Come along, I'll carry you. Miss Dora, will you get one of the boys to bring the chair down."

And before they had time to ask any questions, he had picked his sister up in his arms and was carrying her below to her cabin, followed by Dora. He laid her upon her couch, kissed her, and ran upon deck again without a word. Then, calling the crew up and telling them to prepare the ship for action, he went into the conning-tower and said to Mr. Austen:

"There are three air-ships coming up yonder from the southward. We have only just left the island in the nick of time."

(To be continued.)

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THE SCHOOL TEACHER'S STORY.

I HAVE kept a school for forty-four years. Now I have delivered up the keys, I have packed away on the top shelf of my cupboard a row of primers, geographies, spelling-books, and arithmetics, and I have stopped work for the rest of my life.

Through all these forty-four years I have squeezed resolutely all the sweets out of existence, and stored them up to make a kind of tasteless but life-sustaining honey for old age. I have never spent one penny, unless on the barest necessaries. I have added, term by term, to the sum in my bank-book until I have been able to build this house, and have a sufficient sum at interest to live upon. I need little—very little—to eat, and I wear my clothes carefully and long.

I was never extravagant in clothes except once. That was twenty-five years ago, when I was thirty-five, and expected to be married in the spring. I had a green silk dress then—a bright green; but I had it dyed black, and, after all, got considerable wear out of it, although it was flimsy. Coloured silk is apt to be. I had a blue woollen gown, too—a colour I should never have bought if I had not expected to be married—and that faded. I also had a black velvet cloak—something that was very costly—and I should not have bought it under any circumstances, but I was foolish. However, that has made my winter bonnets ever since; it was a good piece, and not cut up much.

Looking backward forty-four years, I cannot remember any other extravagance than this outlay of clothes when I expected to be married at thirty-five. I never have bought any sweets except a few cough drops when I had a cold. I have never bought a ribbon even, or a brooch.

My mother died when I was fourteen, my father when I was sixteen. Then I began to teach. My father left me nothing. Mother was an invalid nearly all her life, and he could not lay by a farthing. However, there was enough to pay his funeral expenses, and I was thankful for that. I sometimes wonder what my father would say if he could see me now, and know how I am situated. I wonder if he would think I had done pretty well.

I don't know how it can make any difference to him now. He is past all such earthly vanities, even if he knows about them; but I do sometimes feel glad I have done so well, on his account. Everybody has to have some interest besides their own, even if it is somebody's who's dead.

I have built this house, with six rooms in it, and a woodshed. I have a little land too. I keep hens, and I am going to have a vegetable garden behind the house, and a flower garden in front. I have good carpets all over the house, except the kitchen. I have stuffed parlour furniture, and a marble-topped table, and a marble shelf with worked plush on it. I shouldn't be ashamed to ask anybody to go over my house. And I keep it nice too; you could not find a speck of dust anywhere. Of course, I have nobody to put it out of order, and that makes a difference.

It has always been my habit to look at all the advantages there are in life, and I have found there is a pleasant side to almost everything. I can keep my house a great deal nicer than I could if I were not all alone in the world. I sometimes wonder what I should do, if I had a man coming in with muddy boots, or children kicking the paint off my new doors.

To tell the truth I have never cared much about children, though I have been teaching them forty-four years. I never dared to say so before, but it is true.

Once in a while I saw a child that I thought a great deal of; but, taking them altogether, I have often wondered how their own mothers could stand them. I would have worked my fingers to the bone for the few I did take a fancy to. I fairly grudged them to their folks, but the others!—and I had to hide it too; it would never have done for the children to think I was partial. They had all the meanness of grown-up people, without knowing enough to hide it. Grabbing each other's apples and taking each other's sweets, and the big ones plaguing the little ones; throwing paper balls, and drawing on the walls, and everything else. I know, for one, that there's something in the doctrine of original sin. I expect most women who have kept a school forty-four years do.

I have never been sure, either, that they learned anything so as to remember it, and do them any good. I have always been afraid that, however hard I tried to do my duty by them, it was never quite done, and that I was teaching myself more than anybody else, just as I always seemed to hit my hands harder than a scholar's when I had to spank one.

I could travel all over the world, on the map, and never lose my way, but I wonder if my scholars could. I can spell through the spelling book without missing a word, but I know that not one of my scholars can do it. I can do every sum in the arithmetic, measure the depths of all the wells, calculate the speed of all the dogs and foxes, and say the multiplication tables by heart, but I am quite sure that no boy or girl ever left my school who could. It seems to me sometimes that I have gone to school to my scholars, instead of my scholars going to school to me, and that I have never been of any benefit to any one of them.

Still, I have sometimes thought that I was, once, and in a strange way, to the strangest scholar I ever had. Before thinking even of this scholar, and this story, I have to review my face, and my whole character in my mental vision, as before a glass, to establish, as it were, my own reliability to myself. Is it likely that anybody, who looks like that, should tell herself that she saw what she did not see, or heard what she did not hear? Is it likely that anybody who is like that should?

It was just twenty-five years ago to-day that I went to Marshbrook to teach in what was commonly called the Dame School. It was in the middle of spring. I had given up my old school, because I expected to be married that May. But when I found out he'd changed his mind towards me, I felt as if I ought to go to work again. I'd laid out a good deal of money on my clothes, and I knew I'd have to make it up some way, as long as I was always going to have nobody but myself to depend on as I always had.

Marie Rogers had taken my old school. She came when I gave it up, and it wasn't more than three weeks before he began to pay attention to her. She was good-looking, always smiling, although it seemed to me it was a silly smile. I was always sober and stiff-looking, and I couldn't smile naturally even if I felt like it. Her hair curled too. I tried to curl mine, but it wouldn't look like hers. I wouldn't believe it at first when people came and told me he was going with her, and they thought I ought to know; but after a while I saw enough myself to satisfy me.

I wrote him a letter and told him I'd found out he had changed his mind, and he had my best wishes for his welfare and prosperity, and then I began to look out for another school. He didn't marry Marie Rogers until after the Easter term was

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over. She wanted the money for her wedding clothes. I don't know that I should have gone to work again until the autumn, if the teacher at the Dame School at Marshbrook had not left suddenly. One of the managers came for me the next day and asked me to take her place. I asked him why the other teacher had left, and he said she wasn't very well. He was an old man and a doctor. I looked him straight in the face when he spoke, and I knew there was something behind all he said, and he knew I did.

"I'll give you five shillings a week more than we usually offer, as you come to oblige," said he.

"Very well," answered I. I knew what it all meant. I had heard about the Dame School at Marshbrook ever since I could remember. They could never keep a teacher there through the Easter term. There was no trouble autumn and winter, but the teacher would leave in the spring term. They always tried to hush it up, and nobody ever knew exactly what they left for. I rather fancy they bound the teachers over not to tell, or perhaps paid them a little extra. At all events, nobody ever knew exactly what it was, but it got whispered round there was something wrong about the Dame School at Marshbrook.

Only a stranger or somebody aged and pretty courageous could be found to go there and teach in the spring. The chances were that old Doctor Emmons couldn't get another soul besides me for love or money, and if I wouldn't go, the school would have to be shut up. But I cared nothing for the stories. I never was one of the kind that listen and screech, and I had enough real things to think about and worry over. Then I had a kind of feeling then—I suppose it was wicked—that it didn't matter much what happened—after what had happened.

So I just packed up my trunk, while Doctor Emmons waited, and then he put it in behind in his dogcart, and carried me over to Marshbrook. It was about six miles away.

Marshbrook was named after the brook there that runs through marshy land, and gets soaked up in it some seasons of the year. That spring it was quite high, and the land all round it was all golden with cowslips. The doctor didn't say a word about the school, until he set me down at the house where I was going to board. Then he said I looked as if I had no nonsense about me, and he had an idea I should get along well and like the school. Then he said, almost as if he hated to, that I might just as well make up my mind not to stay much after school at night time, and not to keep the scholars. The school was in rather a lonesome place, and then, too, it was rather damp there, near the brook, after the dew fell, and he did not think it was very healthy.

I said, "Very well." I began school next morning, and managed well enough. The school was quite a large one, with about forty in it, and none of them very old. They behaved well, however, and I taught them as well as I knew how.

I did not stay late for the first two weeks, not because I was afraid of anything, for I wasn't, but there was no occasion to. I didn't mind what Doctor Emmons had said at all, as far as I was concerned, but I thought it would be wiser not to keep the children.

I went to church the next Sunday after my move to Marshbrook. I suppose some folks thought I would get somebody to drive me home, as it was only six miles, but I felt as if I would rather see some new faces.

I had a pleasant home, just Mr. Simonds and his wife, and she was as neat as wax and a good cook. She was reserved, and did not talk much, and, as I didn't feel much like talking, I liked her. She used to have supper early, about as soon as I got home from school, and then I used to go upstairs to my room, and sit by myself. Mrs. Simonds was not of a sociable disposition, but after I came folks looked in more. I could hear them talking downstairs; I expect they wanted to find out how I was getting along at the Dame School.

Once Mrs. Simonds said if she was in my place she would not stay after school. I said I hadn't any occasion to stay, and I hadn't. I didn't really have any occasion the night I did stay, but I felt rather downcast, and I didn't want any supper, and I just sat there on the platform behind my desk after the children marched out of the room.

I don't know how long I sat there—quite a long time, I suppose, for it began to grow dusk. The frogs croaked as if they were in the room, and a damp wind blew through the window.

Suddenly, as I sat there, I had a queer feeling, as if there was somebody in the room, and I looked up. I saw down in the middle of the room a little white arm raised in the dusk. It was the way the children did when they wanted to ask anything, and I thought for a second that one had stayed or come back, unbeknown to me, and was raising an arm. Of course that was queer, but it was the only reason I could think of, and it flashed through my head.

"What is it?" said I, and then I heard a little girl's voice pipe up, "Please, teacher, find my doll for me, and hear my next lesson in the primer."

"What?" said I, for it seemed to me I could not have heard rightly. And then the voice said it over again, and that little white arm crooked out of the gloom.

I got up and went down the aisles between the desks, and when I came close enough I saw a little girl, in a queer, straight, white dress, like a night dress, sitting there. Her little face was so white in the gloom that it made me creep, and her features were set, even her mouth did not move when she spoke. It was open a little, and the words just seemed to flow out between her lips.

"Please, teacher, find my doll for me, and hear me say my next lesson in the primer," she said again.

I put my hand on her shoulder, and then I jumped back and snatched it away, for I never felt anything so cold as her little shoulder was. It seemed as if the cold struck to my heart from it, and I had to catch my breath.

"What is your name?"

"Mary Williams, aged six years, three months, and five days," says she.

Then my blood ran cold, but I tried to reason with myself again. She was some child whom I hadn't seen who had run in there, and maybe was not quite right in her mind.

"Well," says I, "you had better run home now. If you want to come to school, you can come at nine o'clock tomorrow morning, if your mother is willing. Then I will hear your lesson, and maybe you will find your doll, but you mustn't bring it to school; I can't have any dolls brought to school."

With that she rose up, dropped a queer little curtsey, that made a puff of icy-cold wind in my face, and was out of the room very fast, as if she slid or floated, without taking any steps at all.

I put on my bonnet, and locked up the school and went home then. Looking back I can't say that I felt scared or nervous. I know I did not walk a bit faster when I went past the old churchyard. There was an old graveyard there near the school, and the children used to play there during recreation.

When I reached the house, Mrs. Simonds asked why I had been delayed, and if I didn't want any supper, but she did not appear surprised or curious. She never seemed surprised or curious at anything.

I went upstairs to my room, and sat down and thought it over. It seemed to me there must be some natural explanation forthcoming. As I thought it over, I remembered that there had been a strange faint choking smell about the child, and immediately I put my own skirt up to my face, and I smelled it again. I hung my dress out of window in the air, when I took it off.

The next morning when the scholars filed in to school, I tried to think that strange little girl might be amongst them, but she was not, and she did not come in the afternoon.

That night I stayed after school again. I had made up my mind I would. I waited, and after a while that little white arm showed out of the desk, but I had not seen the child come into the room.

I asked again what she wanted and she said, just as she had before, "Please, teacher, find my doll for me, and hear me say the next lesson in the primer."

I got up and went to her just as I did before, and three she was just the same, and the faint smell came in my face.

"When did you lose your doll?" says I.

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But she wouldn't answer.

"Please, teacher, find my doll for me, and hear me say my next lesson in the primer," says she, with a kind of a wail. I never heard anything so pitiful as it was. It seemed to me somehow as if all the wants I had ever known myself sounded in that child's voice, and as if she was begging for something I had lost myself.

But I spoke firmly. It was always my way with children. I found it worked best. "Now you run home," says I, "and you come to-morrow, and I'll give you your doll, and hear your lesson in the primer."

And then she rose up and curtsied, just as she had before, and was gone.

I did not try to follow her.

That evening I went round to old Dr. Emmons' and asked Mrs. Emmons if I could see the doctor for a few minutes.

She suspected what had happened, for she looked at me closely, and said she hoped I wasn't getting nervous, and overwrought with school teaching. I said "No." I just wanted to see the doctor about a new scholar; and she left me in the sitting-room and called him in.

I asked him, point blank, if anything had ever happened there at Marshbrook, and he wouldn't tell me at first.

"I suppose you want to give the school up. I thought you were old enough to behave yourself," says he. He was pretty short sometimes, but he meant well.

"I've done the best I could by the school," says I.

"Why couldn't you come home when school was done, as you were told to, instead of staying there in that lonesome place, and getting hysterical?" says he. "I don't know that I can get another teacher this term. The school will have to be shut up. It's a pity all the lady teachers in creation could not be ducked a few times, to get the nonsense out of them. I'll get a man for the place next time. I've had enough of women."

"I don't want to give up the school," says I.

"What are you talking about then?" says he.

"I want to know if anything has ever happened here in Marshbrook," says I. "I don't want to give up the school if anything *has* happened."

He finally told me how a little girl had been murdered, some fifty or sixty years ago, on her way to school, on the Brook Road. They found her lying dead beside a clump of furze, with a great bruise on the back of her neck, as if she'd been hit by a stone, and her doll and her primer were laying in the road, where she'd dropped them when she ran from whoever killed her. They never found him.

"Was her name Mary Williams?" says I.

"How did you know it?"

"She told me," says I.

The old doctor turned as white as a sheet.

"You haven't got any nonsense about you," says he.

When he found out I wasn't frightened, and didn't want to give up the school, he wanted to know what I'd seen, and asked a good many questions. I told him as short as I could, and then I went home.

The next morning before school, I got some linen rags from Mrs. Simonds, and a piece of bright blue flannelette, and I made a pretty little rag-doll. I'd never made one before, but I couldn't see why my work wasn't as good as anybody's. I ravelled out a little of an old blue stocking I had for its hair, and I coloured its cheeks and mouth with paint, and its eyes with blue ink. I found, too, an old primer, that Mrs. Simonds said her mother had studied, for I thought that might have been like the one the child was carrying to school when she was killed.

That night I stayed after school again, and waited until I saw the little white arm raised out of the desk. She did not wait for me to speak that time. She said in a shrill voice, "Please, teacher, find my doll for me, and hear me say my next lesson in the primer."

"Put your arm down and be quiet," says I, "and I will hear your lesson." I put the rag-doll in my pocket, and took the old primer, I had found, and went to her.

"Find the place and go on with your lesson," says I, and I gave her the book. She turned over the leaves, as if she were quite accustomed to it, and I saw at once that I had the right book. It was a queer little primer, that had been written by an old clergyman in Marshbrook, and used in the school there for some time. She found the place soon, and began to read, speaking up quite loudly. You could have heard her out of doors; the windows were open. The piece was called, "The Character of a Good Child." She read it very well. I only made her spell out a few of the words.

"You know your lesson very well," says I. Then I took the doll out of my pocket, and gave it to her. She snatched at it with her little white gleaming hands and they touched mine, and I felt the cold strike to my heart again.

She hugged the doll tight, and kissed it with her stiff parted lips. Then she held it at an arm's length and looked at it.

"Please, teacher, find my doll for me," says she, with a great wail, and I saw she knew it wasn't her own old doll.

"Hush," says I, "I can't find a doll that's been lost fifty years. This doll is just as good. Now, you'd better take it, and run home."

But she just gave that pitiful cry again, "Please, teacher, find my doll for me."

"You are not behaving nicely at all," says I. "That doll is just as good. Now, you'd better take it, and run home."

But she gave that pitiful cry again, "Please, teacher, find my doll for me."

"You are not behaving nicely at all," says I. "That doll is just as good." Then, I don't know what possessed me to say it, but I said, "She hasn't got any mother, either."

How tightly she hugged the doll, and kissed it again and again, and did not say another word against it!

"Now you'd better run home," says I.

She rose up and curtsied, and I was all ready to spring. I followed her. Ididn't know if I could keep her in sight, but I did, and she went into the graveyard. I saw a gleam of white in there a minute; then it was gone.

That evening I went to Doctor Emmons, and told him what had happened. "Now," says I, "I want to know where that child was buried."

Then I asked him to take a lantern, and go to the graveyard with me, and look in that tomb. I scarcely thought I could make him at first. He said the Williams family had all died out and gone away. There wasn't one of them left. He didn't exactly know who had the key of the tomb, and he kept looking at me closely. I suppose he was afraid I was getting off my balance. He kept looking at me and then he felt my pulse, and counted it by his watch.

"You don't want to give the school up?" inquired he.

"No, I don't," says I.

He went out after a while, and presently he came back with a lighted lantern and a key. I don't know where he got it. Then we went down the road to the graveyard. It was a dark night, and it was raining a little. He went along in front with the lantern, and I followed behind. He did not speak a word the whole way.

When we came to the old graveyard he opened the gate and we went in. His lantern lit up all the old headstones, and trees, and scraggy bushes, as we went across to the Williams tomb. It was not very far from the gate. A lot of little bushes were growing out of the humped-up roof, and I read "Williams" in the stonework over the iron door. The doctor fitted the key in the lock, while I held the lantern. I felt as I used to when I was a child, in the dark, but I held the lantern as steadily as if my hand had been an iron hook.

It was hard to turn the key in the rusty padlock, and the door worked quite a long time, but finally it snapped back, and he pulled off the padlock, and slipped the hasp. But even then he could not open the door until he had cleared away some stones and pulled up some little plants that had grown over the threshold by the roots.

After he had done this, he opened the door, and a puff of the same strange odour which I had noticed about the child, came in my face. He took the lantern and stepped down and into the tomb, and I after him. All of a sudden he stopped short, and caught hold of my arm. There, on the floor of the tomb, in the lantern light, right before us, lay the doll and the primer.

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A BURGLAR'S STORY.

SUPPOSE Christmas has its bright side for some people, though I don't think much of it myself. All this precious nonsense about Santa Claus depresses me. The fact is, I did the Santa Clause trick only last week, and I didn't like it. Since then it hurts my feelings if anyone mentions Christmas in my presence. Though I am of a sensitive disposition, I have achieved prominence in my calling. I am prepared to affirm with becoming modesty that I was a first-class journeyman burglar when I met with a painful adventure on Christmas Eve of 1894.

I had been taking life easily for some time, merely doing a quiet job of housebreaking now and then to keep my hand in. So it happened that the day before Christmas I found my pockets nearly empty. Though I dislike to devote myself to professional duties on Christmas Eve, there appeared to be no help for it.

On the night of which I have been speaking, I removed a pane of glass from the kitchen window of a mansion in a fashionable square. Then I scrambled through the opening without taking the trouble to send up my card. There in the darkness I adjusted my mask and lighted my lantern. Then I started to make a tour of the premises. I was not long in finding a quantity of things which I desired to possess.

I immediately began gathering them up, preparatory to carting them away. While I was standing on tiptoe in order to reach the top shelf of the china cupboard, something remarkable happened. Somebody behind me spoke. It was a man. He said, "George, here's Santa Claus." I turned about, and reached for my revolver. The next moment the ugly muzzle of a gun was poked in my face.

"Merry Christmas, Santa Claus," said the young man who held the gun at my head, "delighted to see you. May I be so bold as to ask what you are doing in that cupboard?"

"It was an—an accident," I stammered, "you see I—I made a mistake——"

"Well, don't feel annoyed about it," said the man with the gun. "It's all right, Santa Claus; make yourself at home."

"Invite your friend to step this way, Bob," said another young man, who had been leaning negligently on a big poker near by. As he spoke he turned towards a door leading to an adjoining room.

"With pleasure, George. My dear Santa Claus, will you be so good as to come with us?" The muzzle of Bob's gun silently repeated the polite invitation, and I had no hesitation in accepting it. On reaching the next room, the young man with the poker turned to me and said, with a sweeping gesture in the direction of a big Christmas tree which towered at his side, "Behold, Santa Claus, what you were doubtless looking for when we intruded upon you. Let me suggest that any little tokens of affection which you choose to leave for the occupants of this house might very well be tied on the branches of this tree as we very carelessly neglected to hang up our stockings. We shall be happy to render you any little assistance that we can."

"Gents," said I, "if you'll let me explain——"

"Now," exclaimed Bob, "I insist, my dear Santa Claus, that no explanation is necessary. This being Christmas Eve, nothing is more natural than that you should give us a call. I assure you that you are welcome; your appearance is not precisely what I should have expected, but that is a mere trifle. Now, shall we proceed to business?"

"Anything that suits you, gents," I muttered. The two were such cool hands that I was ready to drop with amazement. "George," said the chap with the gun, "be good enough to assist our distinguished friend to arrange his presents on the Christmas tree."

"With pleasure, Bob. Santa Claus, if you will keep your hands above your head in that graceful position a little longer, I will attend to all the minor details of the ceremony." With that he dived into my pocket and fished out my revolver.

"What a pretty toy!" exclaimed George, as he turned it about in his hands. "That will have a charming effect when hung properly." He mounted a step-ladder, and tied my revolver on the topmost bough of the tree. After that he strung up my dark lantern. Then, in turn, he pulled off my mask, robbed me of my jemmy, a bottle of chloroform, a bunch of skeleton keys, and several little instruments peculiar to my line of business. He also pulled my boots out of my pocket, where I had placed them before entering the house for safe keeping until I should be ready to depart. All these articles he gravely tied on the branches of the Christmas tree.

When George had swung my boots across a bough, and had trotted down the step-ladder for the last time, he struck an attitude and said, "I am charmed, my dear Santa Claus, to have the privilege of returning thanks for these beautiful presents. Your taste is excellent. I trust you will give us permission to distribute them as we choose among the other members of our family. Ah, thanks; I see you consent. And now, Santa Claus, I and my emotional friend at your side have a confession to make. For some years past we have been sceptical regarding your existence."

I made no attempt to reply to this rubbish. After a painful pause I said, "Gents, with your permission, I'll be going."

"So soon!" remarked Bob, getting a better grip of his gun. "This is hard," and he pretended to weep.

I started for the door. "The chimney's over yonder, Santa Claus," said Bob, wagging his head in the direction of the fireplace. It took me a full minute to catch his meaning.

"I—I think I'll go by the door," I stammered. I hoped he was only joking.

"What! Don't you always come and go by way of the chimney?"

"Not always."

"Can it be possible that the story books are mistaken on this important point? It is cruel to rob us of our childhood's fancies. I think," and Bob held the muzzle of his gun close to my ear, "I think, Santa Claus, we'll cling to the old custom. Oblige us by gliding up the chimney in your own airy fashion."

I hesitated. Another glance at the muzzle of the gun decided me. I said:

"All right, gents; I'll not make much trouble about a little thing like that."

I drew off my coat. George caught it up, and tossed it into the branches of the Christmas tree. I stuck my head into the chimney. It was a tight fit when it came to my shoulders, and I started to draw back. I instantly felt the muzzle of Bob's gun prodding me. I set my teeth together and squirmed my way into the horrible black tunnel.

It was a full hour before I dragged myself out of the top of the chimney, and stood on the frosty roof in my stockinged feet. I was as black as a cinder, and was nearly tired to death. When I had pulled myself together, after a fashion, I slid down the rain-spout and limped home.

Luckily I met no policeman. If I had, the chances were about even that either I should have frightened him to death or that he would have taken me in charge for an escaped gorilla. This experience weighed upon my mind so heavily that I reformed and gave up burglary.

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